



**Rhode Island Department of
Health**

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www.health.ri.gov

Interim Health Advisory

Date: August 12, 2009

To: All School Superintendents and Principals

From: Director of Health, David R. Gifford, MD, MPH

Re: Interim Recommendations on H1N1 (Swine) Influenza in RI

Background

Both seasonal influenza (flu) viruses and H1N1 virus will be causing illness this fall and winter. It is expected that ~~30%-50%~~ % of the population will get sick with H1N1 this fall. This advisory has been updated to reflect new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) about how long individuals with influenza-like illness (ILI) should stay away from others. It also includes additional steps schools should take to limit the spread of infection, which will help keep students in school. The Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH) will work with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and Rhode Island schools throughout the flu season to prepare for and respond to the impact of influenza in schools. HEALTH will continue to communicate new information to schools as it becomes available.

School Closure

At this time, due to the mildness of H1N1 overall, both the Center for Disease and Control and Prevention (CDC) and HEALTH **do not recommend** closing schools to prevent the spread of disease. If the absenteeism rate among students and staff prohibits a school from functioning effectively, school districts may consider closure as an option. This decision will be up to the individual school district. School districts should keep in mind that unplanned closures are very disruptive to the community, and should be used as a last resort. **At this time during the pandemic, closing the school(s) will not prevent the spread of disease.** Sporadic cases continue to increase in the community at large therefore minimizing the effect of closing schools on the spread of illness.

Prevention

All schools should remain vigilant about measures to prevent the spread of germs and illness. All schools can remind students and staff to:

- Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow.
- **Anyone who is sick with influenza-like illness (ILI) should stay home until they have been fever free (100°F/37.8°C) for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications. School nurse teachers should continue to educate students and parents about this recommendation and enforce as appropriate.**

Schools can take additional steps to help prevent the spread of germs that cause the flu:

- Separate students and staff who have flu-like symptoms (fever plus cough or fever plus sore throat) from others until they can be sent home. Those providing care to these individuals should wear surgical masks.

- Routinely clean areas that students and staff touch with the cleansers normally used. Special cleaning with bleach is not necessary.
- Identify students and staff at high risk for flu-related complications. If these individuals develop flu-like symptoms, they should speak with their healthcare providers and seek treatment as soon as possible. People at high risk include those who are pregnant, have asthma or diabetes, have compromised immune systems, or have neuromuscular diseases.
- Plan now for ways to continue educating students should the situation in Rhode Island become more severe and many students get sick this fall.

Absenteeism Reporting

All schools should resume daily absenteeism reporting. Often times, unexplained increases in the absenteeism rate are the first indicator that there may be disease in the school or community. Schools will be expected to continue daily reporting during the 2009-2010 school year. HEALTH and RIDE encourage all schools to use summer months to assess and improve their long-term plan for absenteeism reporting. In addition, HEALTH and RIDE recommend that all schools utilize the computerized absenteeism reporting system. We applaud the schools who have implemented this technology. Computerized reporting allows HEALTH to get information as close to real-time as possible. Our goal is to have 100% school district participation in computerized reporting by fall 2009.

Outbreak Investigation and Testing

HEALTH will continue to monitor daily school absenteeism data to identify potential clusters of illness based on higher than normal absenteeism rates. HEALTH continues to work with school nurse teachers to evaluate any unexplained spike in absenteeism rates. If a school's increased absenteeism is attributed to Influenza-like illness (ILI), HEALTH may recommend a sample of students and/or staff with ILI be tested to confirm an outbreak of H1N1. Any representative sample that results in three or more individuals with confirmed H1N1 is considered an outbreak. If HEALTH determines an outbreak of swine flu exists in your school(s), the superintendent and school principal will be notified. HEALTH is not testing every possible case of ILI. If a sporadic case of H1N1 is confirmed in individuals from a physician testing site, hospitalization or other mechanism, it will not automatically prompt an investigation or notification at your school. Again, investigations in schools are based on absenteeism data.

HEALTH Contact Information

Topic	Contact	Phone
Media relations, messages for parents/staff	Annemarie Beardsworth	222-3998
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For regularly updated information, visit <http://www.health.ri.gov> or call 1-800-942-7434.

Additional Resources for Schools

- CDC Guidance for School (K-12) Responses to Influenza during the 2009-2010 School Year: <http://flu.gov/plan/school/schoolguidance.html>
- "Preparing for the Flu: A Communication Toolkit for Schools (Grades K-12)": <http://flu.gov/plan/school/toolkit.html>